

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

James Law: He Helped Establish a University and Founded a Veterinary College, Part I

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
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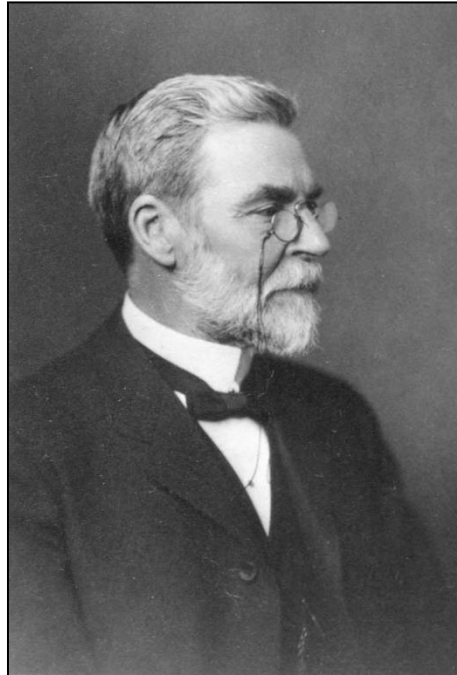
James Law, the third of the trio of Scottish veterinarians who came to North America in the 1860s, had a mission that went beyond animal and human medicine. Unlike Andrew Smith and Duncan McEachran, who established veterinary colleges in Toronto and Montreal, Law was a founding faculty member at a major university, and he spent his career deeply committed to a broad range of disciplines that extended beyond medicine and agriculture.

Law graduated from the Edinburgh Veterinary College in 1857, four years before Smith and McEachran. Guided by his mentor, the scholar-scientist John Gamgee of the New Veterinary College in Edinburgh,¹ Law did not rush into clinical practice. Instead, he spent a year at Edinburgh's medical college, then moved to the European continent and studied at the French veterinary colleges in Lyons and Alfort. He then returned to Edinburgh and accepted a professorship with Gamgee. He developed a strong background in scholarly writing and research, and even followed the college when it closed in Scotland and reemerged in London as the Albert Veterinary College.

Meanwhile in a rural community in upstate New York, a wealthy farmer and state senator named Ezra Cornell joined forces with the academic (and also senator), Andrew Dickson White, to establish the State's land-grant on a tract of land in Ithaca. A stockbreeder with one of the best herds in the country, Cornell realized the importance of animal health and that an accident or disease could wipe out an investment of many hundreds of dollars for prize stock just as easily as it could the livelihood for a farm family with grade animals.² Education was the key to successful farming, he realized, as he lamented the death of a prize Hereford calf. He had medicated the listless calf with various preparations, including pennyroyal tea, linseed oil and milk, and linseed oil and allows, but to no avail. "We should have physicked her on Sunday, if not bled her also; but ignorant of the disease I did not know what remedy to apply."³

Despite his wealth, Cornell was also a practical man with a vision for educating the local farmers. Having already built a public library for them for the princely sum of \$100,000, he wanted to extend education even further and insisted that a "horse-doctor" be among the first faculty of the university that would bear his name. As the lead benefactor for the institution, Cornell got his way and White (the first president) was tasked with recruiting a veterinarian among the inaugural faculty.

Fortune smiled on White as he had met Gamgee while the British veterinarian was in the US at the request of the federal government, investigating a severe cattle disease known as Texas Fever. Gamgee was well aware of the Toronto Veterinary College run by competitor Andrew Smith, and he wanted nothing more than to see his own star protégée, James Law, lead the new university in upstate New York. The deal bringing Law to the US was consummated that summer, and he arrived in Ithaca in time for the opening of Cornell on October 7, 1868.



James Law, Cornell University
Professor of Veterinary Medicine (1868-1908)
Director (Principal) New York State Veterinary College (1894-1908)
(Photo, Cornell University)

Law's approach to science was similar to McEachran's in Montreal. His academic standards were even higher, however, both in admission requirements and in length and rigor of the curriculum (it was four full years). In the first 25 years of his instruction only four students completed the Bachelors of Veterinary Medicine (BVM, roughly equivalent to the DVM degree which was implemented after 1896).⁴ Meanwhile, most New York and New England students either went north to Toronto or Montreal, or to Harvard or one of the veterinary colleges in New York City.⁵ A few went to the University of Pennsylvania after the veterinary school there opened in 1879.

Like other veterinary teaching programs across the country, operating resources were a perennial challenge and Law was not only single-handedly teaching, but writing and lecturing throughout the community and the state. He held a strong presence as a leading scholar in infectious diseases of livestock with special emphasis on diseases that could be spread to people. His understanding of disease transmission and epidemiology made him a particularly important national figure.

To Be Continued as Part II

¹ Established by Gamgee as a rival to the Edinburgh Veterinary College, which was owned and run by his nemesis, William Dick.

² Dorf, Philip. *The Builder. A Biography of Ezra Cornell*. (Ithaca, New York: DeWitt Historical Society of Tompkins County, Inc., 1952), 215.

³ Ibid.

⁴ The four who received Bachelors of Veterinary Medicine (BVM) degrees (roughly equivalent to what became the Doctor of Veterinary Medicine after 1896) included two notable graduates, Daniel Salmon in 1872, and Fred Kilborne in 1885.

⁵ A smaller number of US students studied at Montreal under McEachran where the curriculum was three years in length.

KEYWORDS:

History of Veterinary Medicine
Cornell University
Land-Grant Act
James Law
Duncan McEachran
Andrew Smith
Ezra Cornell
Andrew Dickson White
One Health

TOPIC:

One Health

LEADING QUESTION:

Who was the first Dean of Veterinary Medicine at Cornell?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.